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Burial Rites for Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine: Implications for Modern Society

Saale, Lazarus Baribiae, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island

Bayelsa State

E-mail: Saalelaz@yahoo.com

Phone: +2348036725182

Abstract

This study examined the burial rites given to the ‘Ogoni Nine’ activists from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study adopted the anthropological, philosophical and sociological approaches. Findings from the study revealed that the ‘Ogoni Nine’ include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Saturday Dobe, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuate, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kobel and John Kpuine who were executed by hanging by the military government of General Sani Abacha in 1995. These were Ogoni heroes who fought and died for the Ogoni struggle for survival in Nigeria. The Ogoni were not happy with both the multi-national oil company (Shell – SPDC) and the Federal Government of Nigeria of the careless, tormenting and humiliating ways the corpses of these heroes were handled at death and buried at the Port Harcourt cemetery outside Ogoni land. In Ogoni tradition, the type of burial given to these activists was meant for those who died a bad death and not for heroes such as the Ogoni nine who died in the struggle for survival of their people. Important aspects of the rites accorded, good death at burial were denied them. Traditional burial was organised for these Ogoni heroes by their people to retrieve, transform and purify their bodies and souls from the abode of evil forces. In the Ogoni traditional religion, it is a taboo and a thing that attracts bad omen to society of the living if the heads of their heroes are buried outside or left at the war front away from home. This belief and practices amongst others informed the Ogonis’ demand for a monument that will stand in memories of them to be constructed in Ogoni land.

Introduction

The Ogonis are minority ethnic groups located on the Northeast fringe of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Ogoni consists of four district kingdoms. Each has a dialectic classification of the main Ogoni language of the Volta-Congo language family. Thus,

we can talk of Khana, Gokana, Tai and Eleme dialects respectively. Her neighbours are the Ndoki of the Igbo stock on the north, the Efik/Ibibios and Adoni/Opobo on the west, Bonny and Okrika groups on the southeast and the Ikwerre group on the north-west (Loolo, 1981).

The people have enormous natural resources, chief among them is “crude oil”. This crude oil has been more of a curse than a blessing to the Ogonis, judging from the incidences that have befalling them in contemporary times. In the late 50s the Ogoni land was brought into the forefront of oil producing areas, with the consequent discoveries of oil in Korokoro, Ebubu, etc. As early as the post-independent era, the Ogonis has become a major player in the production of oil, which is the main stay of Nigerian economy.

The Ogonis occupy an area of 400 square miles and number an estimated 700,000. The population density of about 1,250 persons per square mile is among the highest in any rural area of the world (Mitee, 2002).

The Causes of Death of the Ogoni Nine

The Ogoni nine were a group of nine activists from the Ogoni region of Niger Delta of Nigeria. They include Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mosop spokesman, Saturday Dobe, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuate, Baribo Bera, Barinem Kiobel and John Kpuine who were executed by hanging in 1995 by the Military Government of General Sani Abacha (Tripathi, 2005).

In August 1990, the Ogoni elders signed the Ogoni Bill of Rights that was proposed and designed by Ken Saro-Wiwa and some Ogoni activists. In this document, the Ogoni nationality called for political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people, control and use of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development, adequate and direct representation as of right for Ogoni people in all Nigeria National Institutions and the right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation. That year, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), a non-violent action group was formed.

In August 1991, exactly a year after the first being signed, the Ogoni Bill of Right was amended to authorize MOSOP to make an appeal to the international community for assistance after they had received no reply from the Nigerian military government. On 3rd December, 1991, MOSOP presented its demands to those oil companies operating in Ogoni land, including shell, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and Chevron. The companies had to pay back royalties and compensations within 30 days or quit Ogoniland. But, of course, the oil companies did not quit. So, on the 4th January 1993, some 300,000 Ogoni celebrated the year of indigenous peoples by peacefully protecting against Shell’s activities and the environmental destruction of Ogoni land. It remains the largest demonstration against an oil company ever. Shell Company and the Federal Government of Nigeria were worried by the protects, because it was capable of spreading to other oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region (Ogoni Bill of Rights, 2004).

Another remote cause of the death of Ogoni nine was the boycott of the general election held through the country in 1993 by MOSOP. In this year, some members of the MOSOP steering committee and Ken Saro-Wiwa felt that the 1989 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was a complete disaster as the rights and interests of the

minority ethnic groups were not adequately considered. Therefore, MOSOP decided to boycott the general election held throughout the country that year. This group of Ogoni leaders in MOSOP felt that taking part in the general elections of that year would be a foolish thing to do since voting for somebody as President, State Governor or Legislator, amounted to giving power and authority to the political leadership of Nigeria to oppress and ruin the Ogonis. They went further to argue that the votes of the Ogonis would mean nothing to the government because whether they voted or not, results of the elections would be announced. More importantly, a boycott of the general elections by the Ogonis would make the point that the Ogoni people were disenchanted with the Nigeria constitution of 1989 under which the elections were held. Again, the boycott of the country's general elections worried the Federal Military Government and it views Ogoni action as an act of secession.

As the security situation worsened in MOSOP and Ogoniland, General Sani Abacha who took over control of government appointed the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force under Lt. Col Komo and Major Okuntimo. With the development, Ken Saro-Wiwa knew they were going to arrest him and his fellow activists and even execute them. Okonta and Douglas (2001) studying the events in Ogoniland during this period said "Ken Saro-Wiwa knew he had signed a pact with death when he sat down at his desk one early morning in 1990 and wrote the first draft of the Ogoni Bill of Rights. After he and other Ogoni community leaders launched MOSOP later that October, he began to talk incessantly about death.

On the 21st May 1994, four prominent Ogoni chiefs namely, Edward Kobani, Albert Bade and the two sons of Orage all of Gokana speaking group of Ogoni were killed at Giokoo. These chiefs and leaders from the Gokana Kingdom were at a meeting in preparation for the delegate election to the constitutional conference of that year when they were reportedly attacked by a mob and beaten and hacked to death (Saale, 2008).

The following day Ken Saro-Wiwa and several other Ogonis were arrested in connection to the deaths. The arrest was part of the continuing suppression by the Nigeria's authorities of the Ogoni people's campaign against the oil companies and declared Saro-Wiwa a prisoner of conscience held because of his non-violent political activities.

The Ogoni nine were charged by a civil disturbance special tribunal seating in Port Harcourt for conspiracy to murder and aiding and abetting murder of the four prominent Ogoni chiefs. The nine Ogoni activists were executed by hanging in 1995.

Concepts of Death and Burial Rites in Ogoni Tradition

Perhaps it is worthy to discuss in brief, the Ogoni concept of death before going further to look at the burial rites organised for the Ogoni nine. This has become necessary because burial rites are performed as a result of death. Death is considered by the people of Ogoni as an ambitious messenger of God that marks another beginning of the eschatological process of separation, transformation and incorporation of human souls in the spiritual world of their ancestors. Also, it is an inevitable necessary end of every man. The Ogonis are quite aware that they and all their contemporaries are going to die and that death has already overtaken countless earlier generations. This belief is supported by the saying '*so nee u na nee wee mea*', meaning that birth can only take place when death occurs. Thus, the function of death is to perpetuate life (Saale, 1989).

Two types of death are identified by Ogoni people. These are good and bad deaths. Good death is that which occur at a ripe age of a person that led a prudent, self-controlled, generous, heroic, morally and religiously just life. Death is considered bad when it occurs prematurely. All accidental deaths that result from drowning, car accidents, thunder strike, suicide, hanging, and that caused by magic, sorcery and witchcraft practices are regarded as bad death. Also, death that brings misfortunes and calamities to the family and society after burial rites have been done is also considered bad.

The beliefs that death is caused by both natural and unnatural forces is held very strongly among the Ogonis. Death occur when God requests for the soul of a good man at his ripe age of about one hundred years and above. Thus, the expression '*ye bari kue ye*' is used to describe such death; meaning his maker has called him hence his death. It is also believed by the people that death occurs to man when God hands over his soul to evil forces because of the man's misdeeds. Hence, the expression '*ye bari a lea ye ba tema loo ye poro*', meaning God has handed over his care and protection of the man's soul to the devil to carry out their evil mischief.

The commonest causes of death that are believed by the people are magic, sorcery, witchcraft and God. Death may be caused by a man's violation of certain political, economic, socio-cultural, religious and psychological laws that control his existence. For example, a man may die in his efforts to snatch a chieftaincy stool that does not belong to his family. Death also occurs when a man acts as an obstacle on the way of social interaction among people. For instance, a man or woman that commits murder, adultery and other social vices without listening to the cries of his fellow man and the warning of his gods is allowed to die by the gods.

Burial Rites for the Ogoni Nine

Burial rites are performed as a result of death to facilitate the movement of the soul from the physical world to the spiritual. It was organised to appease the ancestors to grant the admission of the deceased into their abode. These rites are necessitated by the people's beliefs in life after death, reincarnation and transmigration of the soul. Sometimes they are performed for social prestige. There are the first burial rites and second burial rites. First burial rites were given to those who die a good death. Death that occur at a ripe age after a brief ill-health. While second burial rites were organised for aged people, heroes and religious personnel as memorial for their good works. It is the second burial rites which were given to the 'Ogoni Nine' that form the thrust of the paper.

The Ogoni nine who were executed by hanging in 1995 by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha were buried at the Port Harcourt cemetery. These groups of Ogoni activists were denied traditional burial rites. When their deaths occurred, they were not announced through cries of women, including wives, daughters and other relatives. No musical instruments like the '*koo zim*', meaning xylophones were played to pass information across to relations. The corpses were not washed, dressed and watch over by relations. Their coffins were carelessly prepared and buried outside their homeland. Wake-keep and all-important rites given to heroes in the Ogoni tradition were not allowed by the Military Government. Ogoni land during this period was militarized and those who wear black clothes were arrested for mourning these activists.

The careless and unjust ways the corpses of these Ogoni heroes were handled by the Military Government was not far fetch. In the thinking of the military junta, the careless and brutal manner with which their corpses were handled would serve as lessons to other living Ogonis and people from other oil bearing communities in the Niger Delta who would want to continue in similar agitation. Also, the treatment was designed to humiliate Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ogoni culture and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People which had gained international recognition as a non-violent movement Africa had ever produced.

Burial rites were organised for these Ogoni nine to serve as a time of transformation, purification or buying of their souls from the evil spirits. Also, it was performed in order to retrieve their bodies from outside and to be taken home for burial in the abode of their ancestors. The retrieving ceremony called “*su nee lee kue kumabe*” is very important aspect of the burial for those who die and were buried outside Ogoni land because the people believe that the head of every Ogoni must not remain outside or at the war front. The corpses of the Ogonis can be deposited at the mortuary away from home but must be buried traditionally in Ogoni land.

The burial ceremonies organised for the Ogoni nine did not take place until the military were withdrawn from Ogoniland following the recommendations of the Justice Oputa panel that the Ogonis should be allowed by the Federal Government to bury their heroes traditionally. The foundation for a National Monument which was to be sponsored by Government in honour of the Ogonis who lost their lives during the struggle was laid at Bori, the traditional headquarters of the Ogonis. This was one of the measures recommended by the Oputa panel as panacea to the Ogoni conflict. But at the time of this research the construction of the monument was yet to be completed by successive administration in Nigeria.

A day of National mourning in remembrance of these heroes is fixed in the Ogoni calendar as part of the Ogoni day. Besides, these National and International recognition of the sacrifices and the heroic death of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists, full traditional burial rites which were denied them were organised by their families and communities to enable them acquire traditional titles in society. Burial rites in Ogoni traditional for the Ogoni nine were performed in proxy traditionally with some rituals and sacrifices.

The day fixed for their burial was announced with the beating of the traditional musical instrument – “*koo zim*” and seven cannon gun shots. This was done to express the people’s traditional beliefs that death of heroes is not a hidden phenomenon and therefore must be publicized. Women who have passed menopause stage and have become a sexual mostly wives, sisters of the deceased person who can stand the grief were gathered to perform their traditional washing or bathing of the corpse. Hot water was prepared by their wives, daughters and sisters for the bathing of the corpse. This rite is believed to be the last service of the relations to the deceased persons.

An image symbolizing the corpse of the deceased person was prepared, dressed with befitting attire for a hero and placed in a coffin. The coffin was laid in their house or family house where women gathered and chant mournful songs. It is the belief of the people of Ogoni that the corpse must be properly cared for and dressed because of the people’s belief that the dead reincarnates.

The coffin with the dressed image were kept from the night of preparation until the time of interment at sunset the following day. At this point, a wake was done by sympathizers, usually well-wishers, and members of societies to which the dead persons had belonged during their life time. As singing, dancing and drumming are performed, members of their paternal relations ‘zuute’ (kins-brothers) and ‘zunka’ (kins-sisters and brothers) sat in their respective houses to make necessary arrangements for the interment. Inquiry were made to know whether the deceased owe any member of the public or whether anyone owed him any debt. This action was taken because the people believe that unsettled debts could affect the dead person at his second birth and even cause premature death to his/her children.

Their graves were prepared by the ‘zuuka’ (kins from the maternal home) who received the coffin after procession was made with it by friends to the Amanikpo house in the town square, different farm routes, market places, and maternal house before burial at the paternal home. At least, seven cannon guns were shot before their corpse were finally laid to rest. Their graves were covered with sand after all mourners and sympathizers have dropped little quantity of sand on the coffin.

Wake which started the first night continued for seven days. The wake-keepers were entertained with plantain, fowls and drinks. The parts of the ritualized animals, fowls and rack of fish and pieces of pounded yam eaten during the burial were gathered and kept in the open at the entrance of the deceased home for the vultures to eat. Vultures are believed to be the agents of the gods and ancestors in the Ogoni tradition. These birds must arrive and eat the ritualized meals before the living could freely eat them. The refusal of the vultures to arrive and eat the meals was considered signs of rejection of the whole rituals by the gods and ancestors. In the case of the burial of the Ogoni nine the gods and ancestors were believed to have given their approval because the presence of the vultures at their burial.

General morning which involve keeping of unkempt hair, wearing of black clothes by mourners had continued in Ogoni land for these heroes. All Ogonis mourn them and had insisted on mourning their deaths until their struggles for survival in Nigeria is over, when the multinational oil company Shell – SPDC and the Federal Government of Nigeria shall have granted the Ogoni demands. This position of Ogoni people is expressed in the symbolic wearing of black clothes to mark their Ogoni day yearly. Also, the spirit and the souls of those who die during the struggle have not been formally initiated in the world of their ancestors through traditional second burial rites because the living Ogonis still want their spirits to continue in the struggle. The people believe that giving of second burial rites to their dead means ushering them into rest at the abode of their ancestor.

Implications for Modern Society

Firstly, burial is one aspects of the Ogoni traditional religion that encourage social cohesion and solidarity among the people. Secondly, it is a source of ethics and morality that serve as glue of the various segments of society. For instance, debtors are not buried until such debts are settled in Ogoni tradition following their beliefs that unsettled debts could affects the dead person at reincarnation and even cause premature death of the children. Also, times of burial ceremonies serve as a period of fellowship, prayer and preaching or teaching of the tenets of the Ogoni indigenous religion and

ethics among the people. Burial periods are used to preserve the indigenous norms, customs and culture of the people that are influenced with the wind of social change.

Thirdly, the significance of vultures arriving and eating meals at burial ceremonies and other traditional gatherings in Ogoni need to be properly studied. This is because its misinterpretations and inappropriate usage were allegedly responsible for the spark of action/crises at the ill-fated events between Ken Saro-Wiwa supporters and the prominent Ogoni chiefs meeting at Giokoo in Gokana Areas of Ogoni land.

Finally, the commemoration and remembrance of the deaths of the Ogoni nine and others who lost their lives during the military campaign of Ogoni land has made the Ogoni struggle with multi-national oil companies and the Federal Government of Nigeria over resource control and environmental degradation part of Ogoni history. The Ogonis today and tomorrow can never forget this historical event. Therefore, both the Federal Government of Nigeria and multi-national oil companies, international communities that buy crude oil from Nigeria and other peace-making bodies should made efforts at resolving this conflict. Meeting the Ogoni demands will heal the Ogoni wounds and make the Ogoni today and tomorrow forgive their enemies even though they will continue to mark the event in remembrance. Suppressing and despising them while they commemorate this event at Ogoni day will not be better options for peace in Ogoniland and Nigeria in general. Commemoration of important events of history is human and cultural.

Conclusion

This study has used the burial rites accorded the Ogoni nine activists including Ken Saro-Wiwa, Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuate, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kiobe and John Kpuine who were executed by hanging in 1995 by the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha to explain the Ogoni traditional beliefs and practices in hereafter, re-incarnation and transmigration of the human soul.

The Ogoni nine were given full Ogoni burial rites as their heroes in Ogoniland after their bodies were carelessly dumped at the Port Harcourt cemetery as a way of discouraging further agitations in the Niger Delta region by other oil bearing communities. Also, to humiliate Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ogoni culture and the movement for the survival of Ogoni people which had gained international recognition as a non-violent movement from Africa. Traditional burial rites described in this study were organised for the group of Ogoni nine activists to serve as a time of transformation, purification or buying of their souls from the evil spirit. Also, their burial was performed to retrieve their bodies and soul from outside ritually in proxy, following the Ogoni beliefs and practices of not allowing the head of any Ogonis, particularly their heroes to remain outside home with their ancestors or at the war front.

The study concluded that the burial and commemoration of the death of the Ogoni nine and those of other Ogonis who lost their lives during the military campaign in Ogoni land is traditional, human and cultural and should be encouraged by Ogonis, multi and FGN. It recommended that both the Federal Government of Nigeria and the multinational oil company Shell – SPDC should consider such commemoration as signal that the Ogonis will not forgive and forget the even which led to their death. Therefore, rather than suppressing and despising this historic commemoration, the people, the oil companies, Federal and State Government and other peace-making

bodies should resolve the Ogoni conflict by meeting necessary demands made by the oil bearing communities of the Niger Delta region.

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